

# AN EARLY RECORD OF HUTTON'S SHEARWATER (*PUFFINUS HUTTONI*) FROM AUGUSTUS ISLAND, KIMBERLEY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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In August–September 1971 staff from the then Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Western Australian Museum carried out a brief helicopter reconnaissance of 15 north-west Kimberley islands. In 1972 and 1973 personnel from these institutions and the Western Australian Herbarium revisited some of the larger islands surveyed in 1971 by boat. They also made the first surveys of other islands in the area. The total number of islands surveyed over three years was 29 (Burbidge and McKenzie 1978).

The survey by Fisheries and Wildlife and Western Australian Museum staff in 1971 was supported by The Royal Australian Survey Corps which, at the time, was undertaking a mapping programme of the north-west Kimberley. The commander of the 5 Field Survey Squadron generously provided helicopter transport to islands as and when it fitted in with his schedule. As a result of this arrangement we were able to spend 88 hours, including the nights of 16–19 August 1971 on Augustus Island.

We were working a limited area near the sea cliffs at the southern end of the island at 15°22'40"S, 124°34'20"E.

On 17 August between about 1900 and 2100hrs two large flocks of petrels were encountered. We were first alerted to their presence by the slightly guttural, petrel-like call being made by some of the birds. With our 12V head torches we were able to see that both flocks were heading south over the island. We also noted their bellies were "very white" in the torch light. The nearby sea cliffs were estimated to be about 50m high. Given the height at which the birds passed over us they would have been flying at an altitude of 60–70m once over water. Each flock took several minutes to pass. There were probably hundreds of birds in total, perhaps as many as a 1000.

Knowledge of shearwaters in Kimberley waters then was virtually non-existent and, apart from the pale belly, there were no clues to link the birds to *P. huttoni* especially as, at the time, its taxonomic status was con-

fused with the Fluttering Shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*). It was only the discovery of the restricted nature of *P. huttoni*'s breeding sites on the seaward Kaikoura Mountains, South Island, New Zealand (Harrow 1965) and their different breeding times that the distinction between the two species began to become clear.

It has taken many years to understand the migratory routes of *P. huttoni*. Although not completely understood it seems they migrate across the Tasman Sea to Australia where some birds move up the east coast and others follow the south and then west coasts possibly circumnavigating Australia in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction.

At the time of our observation *P. huttoni* was only known to be a regular visitor to the seas off South Australia, less often to Western Australian waters and rarely to New South Wales seas (Serventy, Serventy and Warham 1971).

Since then there has been a series of observations. These, together with the collection of a few derelict specimens of *P. huttoni* give some indication of what the movements of non-breeding birds might be. Halse (1981) reported flocks flying south off Point Cloates in Western Australia in late July early August in 1978 and 1979 and indicated there were recent records suggesting that at least some birds spend the non breeding season in the northern Indian ocean. Warham (1981) reviewed data from the

eastern seaboard which, when augmented with Halse's observations, encouraged him to pose the question "does Hutton's Shearwater circumnavigate Australia in a counterclockwise direction?" Warham was probably much influenced by a record from Booby Island, Torres Strait in May 1976 (Vernon 1977) that indicated Hutton's Shearwaters may have been flying west into the Arafura Sea. A later record of a derelict specimen from Katherine, Northern Territory collected early June 1981 (Reed and McKean 1982) could be construed as a passage migrant heading west which would support Warham's hypothesis.

In Western Australia *P. huttoni* is now known to be a common passage migrant (March to early June and late July to early December). The Western Australian Museum now has records off the southern Kimberley coast and very large numbers were seen flying south off Cape Naturaliste in October 2011 (R.E. Johnstone, pers. comm.). The direction and timing of our observation is consistent with other reported movements of the species in Western Australian waters. Such a northerly record could represent spring passage migrants from Western Australia beginning their return to New Zealand or migrants well into a circumnavigation of Australia.

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) which nests on Ashmore Reef (Johnstone and Storr 1998) is the only other

shearwater that could be expected to be seen in Kimberley seas or over the Sahul shelf in the Timor Sea in large numbers. It can be excluded as a possibility as it has grey (not pale) underparts.

The Streaked Shearwater (*Calonectris leuocomelas*) has pale underparts but is a summer autumn visitor to Western Australia's tropical seas, and then only in ones and two's with rare flocks up to 100 (Johnstone and Storr (*loc. cit.*)).

Given the date, flight direction and colour of the underparts of the birds seen we can only conclude the birds encountered were *P. huttoni*.

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